

## Book Reviews

Ian Gibson. 2017. *Suffering and Hope: Christianity and Ethics among the Newars of Bhaktapur*. Kathmandu: Ekta Books

The rapid spread of Christianity in Nepal is a highly controversial topic. Behind this sensitivity, at least in some circles, lies the legacy of Nepal conceived as an *asali* Hindustan—a notion that is predicated on the very absence of foreign religion. But also from other decidedly liberal perspectives, Christianity has an association with particular threats: the subversion of tradition and culture, the homogeneity of modernity, and most prominently, the submission to a Western-dominated world order. In the present charged atmosphere, sober investigation into the recent growth of Christianity is as necessary as it is challenging.

Ian Gibson's *Suffering and Hope* appears alongside a number of recent publications that explore developments in the religious practices of Nepal (viz., Sijapati and Birkenholtz 2016; Gellner, Hausner and Letizia 2016). The monograph, published by Ekta Books, is a printing of the author's doctoral dissertation completed under David Gellner's supervision at Oxford. Gibson conducted ethnographic fieldwork in 2012–2013. In this work, Gibson contextualizes the narrative accounts of Newar Christian converts in social theory (especially as it relates to South Asia), the anthropology of Christianity, and the social and historical role of Christianity in Nepal. He paints a complex picture of the reasons for people turning to Christianity and the effects that the religion has on their lives. Apart from the recently published *Culture and Christianity Negotiated in Hindu Society* by Ole Kirchheiner (2017), Gibson's work appears to be the only full-length anthropological monograph to address the subject.<sup>1</sup>

Public discussion about the growth of Christianity, a perennially provocative issue for politicians and members of the media, often seeks to question, either explicitly or implicitly, the legitimacy of conversions. A

<sup>1</sup> There are, of course, many articles by anthropologists, books on the history of Christianity in Nepal, and memoirs of Christian missionaries and evangelists. An extensive bibliography compiled by Ian Gibson is available at <https://nepalichristianity.com/bibliography/>

brief search that I conducted for the keyword “*isāi dharma*” in the archives of *Annapūrṇa Poṣṭ* reveals the following headlines: “NGOs Spreading Christian Dharma,” “Christian Dharma has Spread Thus,” “The ‘Golden Age’ of Christian Conversion,” “A Nepali Claims Christians Screamed ‘Narayan Narayan, Ram Ram’ After Earthquake,” and so on.<sup>2</sup> These articles betray a tendency to depict Nepali Christians as inauthentic believers who are motivated solely by economic desperation or greed, and the spread of Christianity as fronted by unregulated and malicious foreign NGOs. This public atmosphere that seeks to sully the motivations and deny the agency of converts, along with the conversion experience itself being of central importance to the Protestant Christianity most practiced by Nepalis, has rendered unusually important the question of *why* people would convert. In other contexts, this could simply be a neutral matter of personal sentiment.

Aligned with this popular view of the spread of Christianity is a tendency in the social sciences, dominant at least until recent, to regard religious conversions as either largely superficial or reducible to a socio-economic determinism. As Gibson describes it, social science, in prioritizing the structures and attitudes that give continuity to a society, has at times struggled to account for individual agency, particularly in terms of what can be called ethical behavior. Gibson’s work appears to be a deliberate reaction against these popular and academic moods. This reaction leads him to take particularly strong positions about the genuine transformation that he believes Christian conversion to entail, about the role of human agency in this process, and about the importance of referring to non-socio-economic factors, such as the ideas of theology, in order to give a full account of people’s actions. Perhaps it should be noted that Gibson himself acknowledges his affiliation with Christianity and is therefore writing from a sympathetic position. This should not be a reason, however, to dismiss his strong accumulation of evidence and compelling arguments. If anything, Gibson’s affiliation may have allowed him unique access to a community that is generally suspicious of outsiders.

In *Suffering and Hope*, Gibson develops theoretical arguments based on material that he finds exemplified in the narratives of four Newar Christian converts from Bhaktapur—a man and woman who experience conversion through healing, an influential Christian pastor, and a youth. Gibson sees

<sup>2</sup> Retrieved from Twitter handle “@Annapurna\_Post” on September 25, 2017 and translated from Nepali.

healing experiences as the most common path to Christianity, especially for the older generation. This typically involves a person who suffers from a long-term illness—one that is often psychosomatic in character and attributed to supernatural forces—becoming exasperated by the lack of care shown by family members and the exorbitant cost of ineffective rituals. The person then encounters a Christian who offers prayers, and after becoming integrated in a community of Christians and adopting the ethical lifestyle that this demands, he or she gradually comes to have a transformative experience of healing. Of such converts, women in particular seem to be attracted to Christianity for offering a supportive community and practical solutions in coping with major domestic problems, such as alcoholism, violence, or the mental illness of a family member. Contrary to popular conception, the process from first encountering Christianity to full baptism and the transformative experiences that this is supposed to entail generally occurs over many years.

Comparatively rare (although important in that Christian leaders, such the pastor whom Gibson describes, depict themselves in such terms) are intellectual converts who are attracted to Christianity by a perceived doctrinal superiority to polytheistic Hinduism, and ethical converts who are receptive to the Christian ethic of integrity and service. In taking up the fourth narrative of a youth, Gibson describes a man who is drawn to an image of the Christian God as singularly powerful yet intimately compassionate. Here, Christianity is less a path to healing than it is a means to cope with the anomie of modernity; it is a source of spiritual grounding that provides practical solutions to the challenges involved in pursuing work, falling in love, and dealing with intoxicants.

Gibson's theoretical argument is that the current spread of Christianity can only be explained in light of a major cultural unsettlement, and that certain features of the religion—inwardness, care, a distinct approach to suffering, and above all, an orientation towards ethics—have led to its increasing appeal and fundamentally distinguish it from traditional Newar culture. Although there is a temptation to wonder if Christianity may be only the most recent in a long line of imported soteriologies to be tested by Newars, the reality of a rupture in the traditional order—characterized by Gibson and his informants as a lack of “care,” and surely resulting from the rapid introduction of market capitalism and its imposition of the values of modernity—is undeniable and demands incorporation into any account of the adoption of Christianity. Yet Christianity in Bhaktapur, insofar as it can be seen as related to this rupture,

is perhaps not so much a reaction against the *classic* traditional order, but against the now *mortally wounded* traditional order; it is within this latter order that the rubble of sacred symbols still persists, but the meanings behind these symbols are ever more obscure—some meanings lost forever to an ancient past, some rendered contaminated by the newly developed disenchantment and egalitarianism, and some aggressively co-opted by the ever-vocal identity-based political mobilizers. Elements of the latter can be seen in the Nepal Workers and Peasants Party (NWPP)—which has had a strong hold in Bhaktapur for decades—on which Gibson devotes a fascinating chapter to provide context and comparison.

In many rapidly modernizing traditional cultures such as that of the Newars, Pentecostal Christianity, with its central view that the Atonement of Christ marks the permanent victory of good over evil, has proven highly adaptable and appealing. In this form of Christianity, a vehement rejection of “idolatry” does not amount to an outright denial of the traditional world of spirits, but rather the view that the Christian God is inherently and invariably victorious over this world. Following Weber’s classic typology of theodicy, Gibson argues that such a view leads to religious practices that are imbued with an ethical orientation. This contrasts with the mechanistic and ritualistic practices that are traditionally used to control a spirit world in which good and evil are seen to be on par. The uniquely ethical orientation, Gibson believes, is rooted in two qualities: that of “inwardness,” or an acute attentiveness to personal experience over and above sociality, and an understanding of pain as both a source of strength and a burden to overcome. What’s more, the ethical orientation is centered on the notion of care—that is, a desire to seek the presence of others and acknowledge their suffering. This is a quality that the Christians of Bhaktapur feel to be fatally lacking in Hindu society.

By and large Gibson’s theoretical analysis—which amalgamates “ideas” in the Weberian sense, phenomenological description, and socio-economic considerations—is borne out in the narrative accounts that he presents, and it also strikes me as reasonable based on my personal encounters with Christians in Nepal. His most controversial move, however, as I believe others may also find, is to characterize the integration of Christianity in Bhaktapur in terms of anthropologist Joel Robbins’s notion of “adoption.” Robbins defines this as a situation where “people take on an entirely new culture on its own terms, foregoing any conscious effort to work its elements into the categories of their traditional understandings” (2004: 10). Such a process may be more

readily observable with the adoption of Christianity in isolated and decidedly pre-modern societies. Although Gibson identifies inwardness, care, and an ethical orientation as elements of the Christianity in Bhaktapur that can be characterized as “adoption” and thus new cultural forms, he spends far more time demonstrating their parallels in other religious and political movements than definitively proving their previous absence. As Newars have long participated in the so-called Great Tradition of cosmopolitan South Asia in which many diverse soteriologies and modes of worship are available, and because they are no longer clearly pre-modern, attempting to demonstrate a fundamental newness to the elements identified by Gibson is difficult and perhaps not worth the effort. Furthermore, Gibson’s own study seems to show that Newar Christians do not simply “forego,” in Robbins’ words, the gods, *boksīs*, caste, and other such elements of the traditional order, but merely relativize and reinterpret these elements according to a newly adopted Christian view. I would suggest that relativizing and reinterpreting base-line elements of the shared social dharma is a feature common to all Newars who choose to seriously engage in a soteriological path. Perhaps instead of boldly attempting to identify fundamentally new cultural forms in Christianity that are integrated with no relationship to pre-existing ones, it could be equally reasonable to see Christianity as a new constellation of previously available forms that is unique only in the extent to which it seeks to strongly undermine certain traditional institutions.

Two factors commonly associated with Christian conversion that do not play a major role in Gibson’s analysis are money and caste. Gibson denies that direct financial gain is ever likely a motivating factor in people turning to Christianity. This is because, Gibson observes, conversion often results in a financial loss due to social ostracization, and because whatever foreign money Nepali Christians obtain is typically used for church buildings rather than to entice specific individuals. I suspect this may strike the average man or woman on the street as the antithesis of common sense, but Gibson’s work makes it clear that portraying the present growth of Christianity as a kind of cash grab is at best an extremely partial understanding and at worst utter nonsense.

It also appears that beyond a palpable malaise with the social system in general, caste discrimination played no role in the conversions of the Newars whom Gibson studied. It should be said that there is no exclusively Newar church, much less a uniquely Newar Christianity, as the Newars of Bhaktapur

are integrated in communities of faith with a variety of other castes and ethnicities. Still, there were few Dalits and no Podes (the so-called lowest of the Newar castes) present in the Newar-dominant churches that Gibson studied (they apparently attend other churches). It is also high-caste Shresthas who appear to dominate leadership positions. The absence of interviews with Newar Dalits and the hasty analysis of the persistence of caste within the Christian community are also weaknesses of Gibson's study.

*Suffering and Hope*, in focusing on conversion narratives and social theory, offers only brief but helpful accounts of the history of Christianity in Nepal and its broader socio-political organizations. There is still much research to be done regarding this latter issue. Even the estimates of the number of Christians in Nepal ranges from 375,699 (according to the 2011 census) to three million. Broader sociological questions—from the impact of Christianity on isolated communities, to the extent of foreign money directly or indirectly promoting Christianization, to the links between aggressive forms of proselytization and social service—are sensitive issues that are still shrouded in mystery and conjecture.

Gibson's work features clear and accurate summaries of the complex theoretical issues concerning the anthropology of Newars, South Asia, and Christianity. Academics and researchers will also find his detailed accumulation of sources very helpful. However, one important point needs to be made regarding his use of sources: browsing his bibliography reveals the unfortunate reality that even in the West's most prestigious of academic institutions, doctoral research in the anthropology of South Asia can still be conducted on a literate people in a country replete with an advanced level of indigenous scholarship and an active written media without making reference to textual sources written in languages native to the area. This omission is particularly surprising in light of Gibson's stated aim for the book to have an impact on public debate and discussion in Nepal.

Some other small points of weakness include an inattention to the book's formatting, the absence of an index, and the inconsistent and haphazard renderings of Newari words. I am not sure why Gibson opted to shun the standardized spellings of the language for rough phonetic equivalents.

Overall, *Suffering and Hope* contributes solid ethnographic research and theoretical insights to an important but poorly studied subject. Social scientists interested in Nepal, and particularly those aiming to advance a broader sociological understanding of the spread of Christianity, will find

Gibson's work to be essential reading. Journalists and others in the public sphere who are tasked with depicting Christians and conversion would also be wise to refer to Gibson's work to develop a more sympathetic understanding of the phenomenon.

## References

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